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SUBJECT: ISRAELI REACTION TO PRESIDENT BUSH'S STATEMENT
THAT THE U.S. WILL DEFEND ISRAEL

Classified By: Ambassador Richard H. Jones. Reasons: 1.4 (b, d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Over the past week, GOI officials have commented without solicitation on President Bush's February 2 remarks to Reuters to the effect that the U.S. would defend Israel in a crisis with Iran, saying Israel welcomes America's support, but is prepared to defend itself. These comments reflect a long-held Israeli principle that Israel retains the right to defend itself, with or without the approval of its friends, third countries, and international organizations. They also appear designed to suggest that nobody in the GOI is pressing to formalize a defense commitment between the U.S. and Israel. President Bush's remarks have elicited Israeli media speculation that the U.S. and Israel are secretly contemplating formal security guarantees between the two countries. The media coverage taps into general anxiety about the existential threat Iran poses to Israel, and reflects the average Israeli's expectation that the U.S. would probably support Israel materially and morally if it were attacked, as it has in the past. END SUMMARY.

A "DEFENSE UMBRELLA" FOR ISRAEL?

2. (SBU) Israeli government officials and opinion makers over the last week have been commenting privately and publicly on President Bush's comments to Reuters -- made in the context of a discussion on Iran -- that in a crisis, the United States would "rise to Israel's defense" militarily. Aluf Ben, a senior diplomatic correspondent for the national newspaper "Ha'aretz," (considered Israel's newspaper of record with a nationwide circulation of 70,000 and a globally accessed website) has been the most forward leaning, surmising from President Bush's remarks and comments from Alternate Prime Minister Olmert that the U.S. and Israel are on the verge of unveiling a formal defense pact. In his February 8 piece entitled, "The Umbrella and Its Circumstances," Ben characterized President Bush's remarks as "a milestone in the relationship between Washington and Jerusalem," and "a change in the (Bush) administration's policy." Ben speculated that the details of the so-called "defense umbrella" remain to be hammered out, and suggested that, in the meantime, they serve as "an expression of support for the U.S. administration's favorite candidate (in the March national elections), Olmert."

NO FORMAL SECURITY GUARANTEES EXIST

3. (C) Post is not aware of any treaty or formal agreement between the U.S. and Israel that commits one country to the defense of the other. In June 1993, then Secretary of State Warren Christopher declared that the U.S. would consider offering Israel unspecified "security guarantees" -- including the placement of U.S. troops between Israeli and Syrian lines -- were Israel to withdraw from the Golan Heights, which it has never done. The closest form of a security guarantee to post's knowledge is the Aide Memoire presented in 1957 by then Secretary of State John Foster Dulles to Israeli Ambassador Abba Eban promising that the U.S. would:

(A) "use its best efforts to help assure" that a UN Emergency Force (UNEF), placed in Gaza, would prevent Gaza from serving as a source of armed infiltration of Israel; and

(B) "secure general recognition" of Israel's right to free passage through the Straits of Tiran.

Subsequently, Egypt forced UNEF to vacate Gaza and the Sinai, and itself moved against the Straits of Tiran.

4. (C) While the U.S. and Israel have shared an informal understanding that the U.S. would assist Israel in time of need, the Israelis have always implied that the only assistance they would request from the U.S. would be moral

and material support (including defense materiel and logistics). The Israelis have traditionally asserted that they will defend themselves and will not ask U.S. soldiers to fight and possibly die on their behalf. Related to this is a long-standing principle that Israel reserves the right to defend itself, and in doing so, will act in its own interests. It follows that some Israelis would likely view a formal security arrangement skeptically as they would feel that it ties their hands by denying them the ability to act on their own initiative. The history of Israel acting on its own -- even against the stated concerns of the U.S. -- is full of examples, the two most vivid ones being Israel's 1956 takeover of the Suez with French and British support, and the Israeli airstrike against Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor in 1981. Most recently, in April 2004, Prime Minister Sharon wrote in a letter to President Bush that, "Israel must preserve its capability to protect itself and deter its enemies, and we thus retain our right to defend ourselves against terrorism and to take actions against terrorist organizations."

U.S. SUPPORT FOR ISRAEL IS CONSIDERABLE

15. (U) Formal documents and activities testify to an unusually close political-military relationship and serve to bolster the U.S. and Israel's capabilities to defend each other's interests. In an April 2004 letter to Prime Minister Sharon, President Bush wrote, "The United States reiterates its steadfast commitment to Israel's security, including secure, defensible borders, and to preserve and strengthen Israel's capability to deter and defend itself, by itself, against any threat or possible combination of threats. The United States is strongly committed to Israel's security and well-being as a Jewish state." Other examples include:

(A) Joint exercises and maneuvers, and the significant, annual commitment of U.S. military assistance to Israel designed to maintain Israel's "Qualitative Military Edge" over potential adversaries. The current level of annual U.S. military assistance to Israel totals almost USD 2.4 billion.

(B) In late 1990, the U.S. deployed Patriot missiles in Israel to intercept anticipated Iraqi SCUD missile launches during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm.

(C) In September 1989, then Israeli Defense Minister Rabin and Secretary of Defense Cheney signed an agreement that makes it possible for Israel to lease U.S. military equipment.

(D) In March 1988, then Israeli Prime Minister Shamir signed an agreement designating Israel as "a major non-NATO ally of the U.S."

(E) In May 1986, Israel and the U.S. signed a classified agreement on Israel's participation in Strategic Defense Initiative research, which included the Arrow missile project (an anti-missile system that the U.S. has been funding and helping Israel to develop for more than a decade).

(F) In November 1983, Israel and the U.S. signed an agreement initiating annual meetings of the Joint Political-Military Group (JPMG) and Joint Security Assistance Planning (JSAP) program. The JPMG and JSAP serve to coordinate the U.S. and Israel's security policy and ensure that U.S. military assistance to Israel is in keeping with our shared goals in the political-military sphere.

(G) In November 1982, then Secretary of Defense Weinberger and Defense Minister Ariel Sharon signed a Memorandum of Understanding establishing a framework for continued consultation and cooperation to enhance the national security of both countries.

(H) The United States has supported the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO), positioned between Egypt and Israel, since that peacekeeping operation's creation in August 1981.

(I) President Nixon's decision to rush military supplies to Israel during the height of the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

GOI OFFICIALS ASSERT ISRAEL WILL DEFEND ITSELF

16. (C) Perhaps in response to the media reaction, some GOI officials have felt it necessary to clarify Israel's view on the President's statement and the issue of a U.S. defense commitment. In a February 8 meeting with the Ambassador (septel), Israeli MOD Director General Jacob Toren in an unsolicited observation said that "Israel intends to fight for itself. We do not ask U.S. troops to fight for us. This was true even in the dark days of the Yom Kippur War." In a meeting with the Ambassador on February 8 (septel), Likud Member of the Knesset and former Deputy Defense Minister Zeev

Boim remarked that President Bush's declaration to provide a defensive umbrella to Israel if it were attacked "shows how close we are," but left the issue at that. Alternate PM Olmert told the Ambassador February 9 he "respected" the President's statement.

MOST ISRAELIS BELIEVE THE U.S. WOULD HELP IN A CRISIS

17. (U) To the best of post's knowledge, no Israeli leader has voiced any expectation, or desire for, the U.S. to dispatch troops to defend Israel in the event of an attack. Public awareness exists on both sides of the Atlantic, however, that Israel is not an expendable ally, and the average Israeli probably believes that the U.S. would not let Israel be defeated in the event it were attacked. It is probably less clear how they would wish the U.S. to assist Israel, although the U.S. has sent emergency shipments of military aid to Israel in the past (1967 and 1973), has deployed defensive weapons in Israel (1991), and maintains significant amounts and varieties of prepositioned materiel in Israel that could be devoted to Israel's defense. Average Israelis at a minimum probably believe the U.S. would support Israel in at least two ways -- by defending Israel's right to defend itself in the court of international opinion, and by providing maximum logistical and equipment support.

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JONES